

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000784

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL

1E. O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PGOV VM KIRF HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: MORMONS MAKE BID FOR A QUIET COMEBACK IN HCMC

REF: Hanoi 2153

1. (SBU) Summary: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) has recently taken steps to reestablish a "branch" in HCMC, pending approval of its June request to local government officials that Vietnamese members be allowed to meet regularly on Sundays. While efforts to receive recognition from the central government have thus far failed, local LDS leaders hope that a patient, apolitical approach will eventually help them expand operations in Vietnam. LDS representatives in HCMC have asked that this information be kept strictly confidential, citing past setbacks in neighboring countries when such information has been discussed openly in the State Department's Human Rights and Religious Freedom reports. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Resident expatriate LDS leaders recently told ConGenoffs they had lodged a formal request with HCMC officials in June seeking permission to open a "branch" for Vietnamese members to meet on a limited basis. (Note: A branch is the smallest possible unit of organization within the LDS. Very few countries would have just a single branch.) The LDS request carefully avoided mention of religious rituals, and LDS officials have said they would be satisfied to open a "church," rather than a "temple," despite the limits a lesser designation would place on performing the sacraments. Ten Vietnamese members met Sunday, August 24 for the first time within the framework of the new "branch" structure. The branch is administered locally by a President and two Counselors -- one for expatriates and one for Vietnamese. If the HCMC government response is favorable, LDS plans to facilitate funding from Salt Lake City to acquire a local meeting place. According to LDS, the number of LDS members in Hanoi is apparently insufficient to justify the same request at the national level.

3. (SBU) According to local LDS sources, the first post-war LDS branch was closed down in 1996, after authorities learned that volunteer LDS Charities English-language teachers were inviting students over to their homes (including some who were not among the cadre corps officially authorized to take lessons). At the time, as many as 100 expatriates and Vietnamese routinely gathered together to attend worship services every Sunday. The unauthorized house visit incidents also resulted in LDS Charities losing its NGO registration -- which has yet to be reinstated, despite repeated requests. In the meantime, LDS has continued to send small numbers of service missionaries, generally as volunteer English teachers or medical workers. The regional Mission President with responsibility for Vietnam has also continued to visit from a nearby country.

4. (SBU) A local LDS leader acknowledged that the number of members in Vietnam remains difficult to ascertain. Some believers wanting to become members have traveled to Cambodia to be baptized, then returned to Vietnam. Others who have attended LDS meetings and studied the religious doctrine remain officially outside of the LDS because they have not been baptized. (Note: None of the LDS sacraments, including baptism, can be performed in Vietnam in the absence of a legally established organization.) Some undetermined number of members baptized before 1975 are also still active. Expatriate members have always managed to meet without interruption, but current numbers may be as low as 20 in HCMC.

5. (SBU) LDS leaders have told ConGenoffs they believe "trust building" is the most productive approach for receiving official permission to conduct activities in Vietnam. By carefully adhering to the parameters of whatever permission they receive from local officials, they hope to convince the GVN that they are not a threat to the country's political stability. Over time, the LDS hopes this low-key approach will allow them to increase the scope of their activities. Repeated requests for recognition since 1994 to the Committee for Religious Affairs in Hanoi have gone unanswered, according to these sources. At one point, LDS was told that their application was being held for consideration in Hanoi, pending a more comprehensive review of the laws on religion.

6. (SBU) Comment: One Vietnamese LDS member told ConGenoffs he had spoken to local police about a particular meeting location and been told the police had "no problem" with members meeting there. Whether that bodes well for official recognition or not is anybody's guess, as district and ward officials probably have no way to differentiate LDS from the myriad Protestant sects who worship openly but "illegally" here. Whether this LDS group will

continue to be able to meet if official permission is denied in the future, is a bigger question. While there would appear to be fairly substantial contact between expatriate members and their Vietnamese converts -- despite GVN prohibitions specifically against LDS proselytization -- this should not be something we publicize in the current environment.

YAMAUCHI